



CLAIMING OUR FUTURE

a progressive movement for an equal,
sustainable and thriving Ireland

Conditions for Effective Participation

Democracy Group Discussion Paper

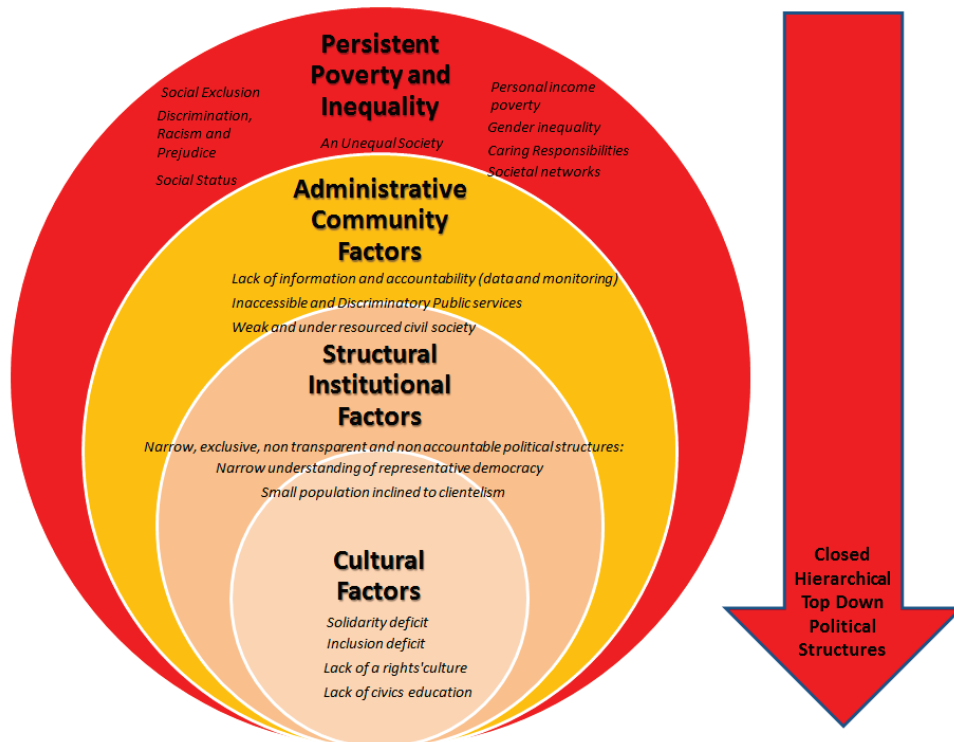
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A. Introduction

Ensuring greater democratic participation in society will involve transforming our constitutional and institutional structures (see also issues/discussion papers on constitution and local government). However, on its own this will not be enough. It will also require addressing the barriers that currently exist to participation and actively building an environment and culture which enables and empowers people to participate and influence the decisions that affect their lives and to have control over those who make decisions on their behalf. This issues/discussion paper tries to identify some of the main barriers to greater democratic participation and to suggest some of the things that might be done to overcome them. It is intended as a starting point to stimulate discussion debate among local Claiming Our Future groups.

B. What are the key barriers to effective democratic participation?

There are many persistent and overlapping factors which have disempowered many people from participating fully in society and which have acted as barriers to democratic engagement. These include cultural, structural/institutional and administrative factors together with the effects of persistent poverty and inequality. Some examples of each are given below.



Cultural factors

- *Lack of a culture of solidarity and inclusion:* our political and societal culture is overly dominated by a market ideology and individual advancement at the expense of collective social solidarity. This increases marginalisation and powerlessness.
- *Lack of participative in education:* There is insufficient emphasis in our education system on promoting and developing a culture of civic engagement and collective solidarity.
- *Clientilism and a lack of a culture of rights:* The tradition of having to go to your TD or local councillor to get things done and to access state services undermines people's sense of a right to engage directly with public services and their right to public services. It reflects a weak culture of social and civil rights and, perhaps, their insufficient articulation in the Irish constitution. All of this creates a culture of dependence and disempowers people. It thus undermines civic engagement.

Structural/institutional factors

- *Narrow, exclusive, non transparent and non accountable political structures:* Decision making structures seem remote and impenetrable to many people. Most day to day decision-making appears to be largely influenced by powerful elites and remote bureaucrats and there is a lack of transparency or accountability. Decisions seem to be taken in a top-down manner and often largely in the interest of elites. There is a lack of ways of holding people accountable for the decisions they make and it can be difficult and expensive to find out the basis on which decisions are made. The Freedom of Information legislation is too weak.

- *Hierarchical and top down structures:* A tradition of top-down, hierarchical decision making in our political, bureaucratic and religious structures has led to excessive deference to those in positions of authority and a tradition that “they”/“we” know best.
- *Narrow understanding of representative democracy:* There is a strong ideological view that interprets representative democracy in very narrow way. Thus on too many issues people find that their role in the existing democratic system is just limited to participating in periodic elections. For most people there is little encouragement and opportunity to participate on a regular basis in decision making processes between elections. Structured opportunities for people to participate in decision making processes that affect them are too limited.
- *Weak and under resourced civil society:* There is insufficient (and diminishing) resourcing and recognition of community and voluntary organisations with a strong participative culture and too limited an understanding of their role in ensuring a strong, inclusive civil society. This limits the development of participatory democracy.

Administrative factors

- *Poor and inaccessible public services:* The limited access to essential and universal public services (e.g. health, education, housing, social protection and social services) and the delivery of services in ways that limit participation and involvement disempowers people and limits their democratic engagement.
- *Lack of information and accountability:* There is insufficient information available about how to engage in and influence decision making processes on an ongoing basis. There is insufficient accountability for decisions taken.
- *Lack of data and monitoring:* The lack of publicly available data and monitoring of policies on many key issues limits the ability of people to engage in a debate about policies. There is also a lack of a tradition of formal arrangements for involving those affected by policies in their ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

Persistent poverty and inequality

- *Poverty and social exclusion:* High levels of poverty and social exclusion have contributed to disempowerment and disengagement and alienation from democratic processes. Poverty and discrimination undermine people’s skills, self-confidence to engage with policy makers and to express their opinions as equals and to participate in making decisions and implementing them. The day to day struggle to survive means that there is often little time, energy or resources left to engage with democratic processes.
- *An unequal society:* Ireland has historically been a very unequal society with wide gaps in income and resources between the top and bottom of society. Control over decision making is dominated by those with resources and for those at the bottom the existing democratic processes often seem very remote and irrelevant and people feel disengaged and powerless to influence them.
- *Discrimination, racism and prejudice:* Just as with poverty, discrimination, racism and prejudice disempower and undermine people and limit their opportunities to engage with the political and administrative decision-making systems.

- *Gender inequality*: The persistence of gender inequalities in society is reflected in the very low level of women in public life and this undermines women's participation in democratic processes.

Questions for discussion:

- *What do you think are the main factors limiting democratic participation? What would you add to or change in the list of factors identified above?*
- *Why have these factors been so persistent and why has there been such reluctance to discuss the development of a broader more participative type of democracy?*
- *Do you think that the current economic and financial crisis creates a new opportunity to address some of the issues and to create a real debate on how to create an more inclusive democratic and egalitarian democratic system? Why and how?*

C. What is needed to enable greater participation?

The following diagram summarise some suggestions of actions that are needed to increase effective participation and to overcome the barriers that hinder democratic engagement. These are then elaborated in more detail in the text.

Possible changes to promote greater democratic participation

Cultural changes	Structural/institutional changes	Administrative changes	Actions to tackle poverty & inequality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new model of development based on CoF values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limit power of executive & non elected bodies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • require participation strategies for all agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • put right not to experience poverty & social exclusion in Constitution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • promote civics education in schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • give citizens direct say in legislative processes (right to initiate legislation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establish local democracy resource centres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strengthen social rights in Constitution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enshrine right to participation in the Constitution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • curtail & make visible role of lobbyists • make greater use of referenda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organise voter registration campaigns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop comprehensive poverty strategy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop more diverse media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reform Senate to represent civil society • give formal right to civil society organisations to be involved in decision making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organise Voter Education-Active Citizenship programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • poverty proof all policies
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organise more local plebiscites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strengthen Freedom of Information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strengthen anti-discrimination & racism legislation and programmes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increase support for community development / education / arts 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enforce 50:50 gender balance in politics and public agencies

Cultural changes

- *Foster a culture of solidarity and inclusion in public life:* Creating a climate in which the empowerment and participation of all is prioritised will require actively working for a change of values. It will mean challenging our over reliance on the market-place and competition and the trend to rampant individualism and it will require the state to actively foster values such as equality for all, solidarity between all sectors of society, accountability from those in power, participation by people in decision-making and environmental sustainability.
- *Promote civic education in schools based on Claiming our Future's core values:* Our education system should actively promote a culture of solidarity and equality through civic education programmes in schools.
- *Promote a diverse media:* Ensure that there is an independent and diverse media that reflects the views as aspirations of all society and not just wealthy elites.
- *Enshrine the right to participation in the Constitution:* ensure that the Constitution recognises the right of all people living in Ireland to be consulted about the decisions that affect their day to day lives.

Structural/democratic changes

- *Develop more inclusive, participative open and accountable representative democracy:* This will mean developing measures aimed at enhancing the openness, accountability and inclusiveness of formal representative democratic systems so that they are more accessible and relevant to people who feel powerless and excluded. Such measures could include:
 - limiting the power of the executive and unaccountable bodies and emphasising the power of parliament and local government;
 - creating mechanisms whereby citizens, including those who are marginalised and excluded, can have a direct and focused say over political decisions and policies (e.g. through the right to initiate legislative processes);
 - limiting and making visible the inputs of interest groups and lobbyists into the political process;
 - greater use of referenda;
 - requiring increased accountability and visibility of elected politicians;
 - reforming the Senate to give representation to the diverse strands of civil society
- *Give formal recognition to participatory democratic structures alongside representative democratic processes:* For instance by:
 - developing participatory/deliberative forms of citizens' engagement in public governance (see paper on democratic local government);
 - enhancing democratic participation by recognising, fostering and resourcing the advocacy role of civil society organisations;
 - making wider use of local plebiscites;
- *Build a strong and inclusive civil society and give it a formal role in policy making:* Increase support for community development, community education and community arts projects and establish a clear legal framework and provide

adequate resources to support the participation of these groups in policy making – i.e. give formal recognition of the right to meaningful involvement at all stages of decision making.

- *Strengthen programmes to empower marginalised individuals & groups:* Support specific programmes which will work directly to empower those who are living in poverty and will ensure a strong and inclusive civil society. Thus prioritise support to community development, community education and community arts projects which support people to develop their knowledge, skills and confidence and to take collective action to participate in the decisions that impact on their lives.

Administrative changes

- *Require participation strategies for all agencies:* Require all government departments and public agencies to develop and publish a strategy for involving people in decisions that affect them
- *Increase information on how to participate:* provide citizens with information on how to influence and participate in democratic processes. For instance:
 - establishing democracy resource centres at local authority level where people can access information and advice to navigate their way through the democratic system;
 - organising voter registration campaigns;
 - organising Voter Education-Active Citizenship programmes, especially for excluded groups and communities).
- *Strengthen Freedom of Information legislation.*

Tackle poverty and inequality

- *Introduce the goal of poverty reduction and promotion of social inclusion in the Constitution:* in line with the Horizontal Clause of the Lisbon Treaty (Article 9) make the reduction of poverty and social exclusion a core objective in the Constitution.
- *Strengthen social rights in the Constitution:* ensure that the social rights (e.g. right to adequate housing, education, social protection, health and social services) are incorporated more strongly in the Constitution
- *Develop a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy:* This will require:
 - a more comprehensive social inclusion strategy combining in an integrated way adequate income support, inclusive labour markets and access to more inclusive and universal public services;
 - proofing of all policies (including economic policies) for their impact on poverty and social exclusion.
- *Tackle discrimination & racism & respect for migrants' rights:* Empower minority groups to engage in the democratic system through:
 - promoting a positive vision of an ethnically diverse and inclusive society characterised by equality, including gender equality;

- enforcing and monitoring strong equality and anti-discrimination legislation;
 - strengthening national strategies to combat racism with programmes to support the integration of minorities, with public services that give particular attention to the needs of minority/at risk groups and with programmes of intercultural education which promote a belief in solidarity and equality and a respect for difference and diversity;
 - increasing support to community development and community education projects which prioritise migrant and ethnic minority groups and support them to act collectively to assert their rights.
- *Promote greater gender equality in all political and administrative structures:*
Introduce legislation which will require:
- all parties at national and local levels to achieve a 50:50 gender balance amongst candidate;
 - all cabinets to achieve a 50:50 gender balance;
 - appointments to public agencies to achieve a 50:50 gender balance;
 - at least 50% of senior public service appointments to be women.

Questions for discussion:

- *What do you think are the main steps that need to be taken to increase democratic participation? What would you add to or change in the list of ideas identified above?*
- *Which actions do you think are the most important for Claiming Our Future to focus on?*